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GOETHE AS VIEWED BY EMERSON¹

The subject of Emerson's relation to Goethe has nearly always been treated as if it had remained the same for all periods of Emerson's life. When a development is intimated the study is hardly carried beyond the date of the writing of Emerson's *Representative Men* in 1845.² Moreover, nearly everything written on the subject deals chiefly with what Emerson has said of Goethe directly. The deeper significance of the close relation of some of Emerson's thoughts, especially in his poetry, to those of Goethe has barely been touched upon.

It is the purpose of the present study to show that Emerson's view of Goethe was an evolution, in which Emerson judged Goethe from three different standpoints: that of a rigorous Puritan; that of a modified Puritan; and that of a Naturalist. An attempt is also made to show how closely some of Emerson's profoundest poetic thoughts are related to those of Goethe.

Emerson's relation to Goethe is an extremely interesting study. They were on common ground in that both had a great passion for out-of-door nature; both were poets of the subjective; each had a deep-lying stratum of Pantheism at the foundation of his mental nature; neither would be bound by the limitations of any expressed religious creed or set of inherited doctrines. Both were

¹ The present article which furnishes a sort of supplement to the author's excellent monograph *Margaret Fuller and Goethe* (Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1910) was accepted for publication shortly before Dr. Braun's untimely death in the early part of September 1915.—Ed.

² Among the works dealing with some phases of Emerson's relation to Goethe are *Emerson and German Personality*, by Kuno Francke, *International Quarterly*, 1903, VIII, pp. 93-107; reprinted in *German Ideals of Today*, Boston & New York, 1907, pp. 93-126. *Emerson's Verhältnis zu Goethe*, by Calvin Thomas, *Goethe Jahrbuch*, XXIV, pp. 132-152. *Emerson's Opinion of Goethe*, by S. H. Goodnight, *German-American Annals*, May, 1903, I, N. S. pp. 243-256. K. Woltereck, *Goethe-Fragen in Amerika; Goethe-Jahrbuch*, XXXIII, p. 174 ff. *Emerson's Relation to Goethe and Carlyle*, by Wm. T. Harris, *The Genius and Character of Emerson*, Boston, 1885, pp. 386-419. *Goethe in Amerika*, by H. S. White, *Goethe Jahrbuch*, V, pp. 230, 231, 236. *Ralph Waldo Emerson über Goethe und Shakespeare*, by Herman Grimm, Hanover, 1857. Notes on Emerson, *Goethe Jahrbuch*, IV, pp. 377, 378. *Emerson and his Contribution to Literature*, by D. L. Maulsby, Tufts College, Mass., 1911. *Goethe- und Herder-Ausgaben*, by H. J. Schmidt, *Preussische-Jahrbücher*, Berlin, 1879, XLIV, p. 441.

citizens of the universe, and could not be provincialized by state or nation. Both, finally, were liberators with the same trend of thought and sought all their lives to evolve a higher, more expansive form of character, a broader, and if not happier, at least a more serene view of life on Emerson's part, and a more manly one on the part of Goethe.

Goethe's ideal of character, as developed in his works, is one in which are balanced intellect and feeling, the æsthetic and the religious, the moral and the sensual. He believed that a beautiful harmony should exist between these parts, that there should be no tyranny of one part of our nature over any other part, and finally no strife. Moreover, that even temptation and the so-called "wiles of the Devil" helped, in a healthy nature, to strengthen such a character.

Emerson, though he had broken with the traditional church, was, however, for a decade or more after he became acquainted with Goethe's works, still too much of a Puritan rigorist by inheritance and natural feeling to look with much charity upon the life of a poet as unlike his own, officially, socially, perhaps morally, as Goethe's was, or to read, without a shock to his religious modesty the details of Goethe's description of the struggle of a soul with sin to gain a mastery over itself and attain finally an inner freedom. Emerson's early environment had been so totally different from Goethe's. His view therefore as to what should and what should not be freely spoken of, or included in a book, often differed widely from that of Goethe. Consequently Emerson not only fails at first to appreciate the import of Goethe, but expresses in no uncertain language the most hostile feelings against him.

Emerson's whole attitude here is doubly interesting because it represents precisely that taken by the large majority of New Englanders during the third and fourth decades of the last century.

What Emerson wrote of Goethe up to the year 1845 is fairly well known, generally. The reader is referred to the full account of Emerson's views in his works. A short synopsis of his treatment of Goethe to this time is, however, indispensable here to show just how rapidly and in what directions Emerson developed during this period.

In 1834 Emerson wrote to Carlyle after reading Goethe some time and bitterly deplored the "adulation" which followed "that velvet life" which Goethe led. "What incongruity for genius,

whose fit ornaments and reliefs are poverty and hatred, to repose fifty years on chairs of state! And what a pity his duke did not cut off his head." "The Puritan in me accepts no apology for bad morals in such as HE." We might "tolerate vice in a splendid nature," Emerson believes, but with "genius pampered, acknowledged, crowned," as in Goethe's case, it becomes mere "skill in attaining vulgar ends." He is a "false priest, the falsest of false things," "a cassock," a "harlot muse," intellectually so defective that he only helps to perpetuate with his "impure word" the "present corrupt condition of human nature," the "gross gas that now envelopes us."³

This is how Emerson viewed Goethe in 1834. Goethe seems to him almost everything that a poet should *not* be. We shall see how, with a deeper study of Goethe's works, and with the mellowing effect of age, a change of attitude is gradually developed in Emerson; how step by step he frees himself from early prejudice and grows more and more to appreciate his predecessor, until he ranks him as the greatest literary power of the age. Much credit is due to Carlyle, to F. H. Hedge, and doubtless to Margaret Fuller in this steady process. Emerson believed—to quote his own words—that "the healthful mind keeps itself studiously open to all influences."⁴ And yet it must be borne in mind that Emerson was particularly independent intellectually, and never allowed himself to be swept off his feet by any influence, however strong.

One of the two views of Goethe standing between Emerson's first, in the letter to Carlyle, and his last, is the one in the *Dial*, 1840. Emerson had read up to this date fifty-five volumes of Goethe in the German.⁵

At this time Emerson looked upon Goethe as a profound scholar, a great naturalist and philosopher, who made his own all that the ages inherited or invented. He is a "resolute realist," brave, clean, sagacious, and free from all tradition, convention and narrowness, an observer who "pierced the purpose of a thing," "a king of scholars," and even more, a lover of nature, who "seemed to give a new meaning to that word." But Goethe is to Emerson

³ *Correspondence of T. Carlyle and R. W. Emerson*, Boston, 1883, Letter of Nov. 20, 1834, I, p. 29 ff.

⁴ Emerson's outlines of lectures, J. E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston & New York, 1887, II, p. 719.

⁵ *Correspondence of T. Carlyle and R. W. Emerson*, April 21, 1840, p. 285.

still "infected" with a "vicious subjectiveness," a "subtle element of egotism," and a total "want of frankness." Emerson is provoked with his "Olympian self-complacency," his "patronizing air," his design always to astonish and produce an effect. There is not a "syllable" of the "transcendent muse" in Goethe, but instead, and worst of all, a total "absence of the moral sentiment." Goethe, though talented, is only a subtle "poet of the actual" and "of limitation," not "of religion and hope"; in short, a "vulgar poet."⁶

This criticism, "not so much spoken as felt," as Emerson confesses at the end, though very severe, still shows conclusively that Goethe has grown considerably in Emerson's estimation. Goethe is here at least an intellectual genius, who thinks deeper and writes better than any other man. Yet Emerson accuses Goethe of almost the same serious shortcomings, as a poet, as before. How slowly, but steadily, Emerson really grew to appreciate him as an artist and moral writer is shown by Emerson's lecture on Goethe, first delivered, according to Cabot,⁷ in 1845, and published in *Representative Men*.

Here again Goethe has the same good traits as before, and in a higher degree. He is "a manly mind" without a trace of provincialism, self-commanding and self-denying, "the master of histories, mythologies, philosophies, sciences, and national literatures," the acutest of observers and the profoundest of thinkers. But he is this to Emerson in addition to what he was in 1840: He "strikes the harp with a hero's strength and grace." "There is a heart-cheering freedom in Goethe's speculations." "He has clothed our modern existence with poetry," and "he has defined art" and "has said the best things about nature that ever were said." *Faust* is "the flower of this time" and "no book of this century can compare with *Wilhelm Meister* in its delicious sweetness."

Still Emerson has not outgrown his rigorism as yet. The conclusion to *Wilhelm Meister* is "lame and immoral;" he "has so many weaknesses and impurities and keeps such bad company." Goethe's tone is "worldly"; he "is incapable of a self-surrender to the moral sentiment" and "can never be dear to men." His

⁶ Emerson's Works: *Natural History of the Intellect*, Boston and New York, 1893, 158 ff.

⁷ *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, by J. E. Cabot, II, p. 752.

devotion is merely "to truth for the sake of culture." He is "artistic but not artist; spiritual but not spiritualist."⁸

This then was Emerson's conception of Goethe in 1845. Emerson feels much less restraint in his praise of the merits of Goethe's works here. He appreciated also, more than ever before, the truly poetical, the liberating, and artistic virtues in Goethe's writings, qualities which he had hardly mentioned before in connection with the German poet.

It is evident too, from the whole trend of Emerson's adverse criticism here, severe as it may seem, that there is chiefly one gap left to prevent his thorough appreciation of Goethe—namely, to be convinced that Goethe is also a moral writer. That Emerson outgrew this last of his inborn aversions to Goethe is evident from the facts: first, that he seldom enters after this even the merest hint of an objection to Goethe,⁹ and lastly, Emerson states directly in discussing *Faust*, that he found Goethe pure.¹⁰

Peculiarly enough Emerson is much more just and appreciative toward Goethe in his *Journals* than elsewhere. Not much adverse criticism is found in them, but a great deal that goes to show how constantly Goethe was on Emerson's mind. Holmes counts sixty-two references to Goethe,¹¹ including many quotations, in Emerson's works published up to the year 1884. If the references in his *Journals* were added this number might be multiplied.

Just as Emerson, in his lecture on *Goethe, the Writer*, has set him down as one of the world's six great representative men, Goethe in Emerson's poem, *The Test*, stands for one of the five great literary powers in the world's history.¹² The other four are Homer, Dante,¹³ Shakespeare and, peculiarly enough, Swedenborg. Of Goethe

⁸ Emerson's Works: *Representative Men*, Boston, 1850, p. 257 ff.

⁹ Such, for example, as in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, I, p. 242, and in Emerson's *Journals*, IX, p. 421.

¹⁰ See this paper, p. 31.

¹¹ O. W. Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston, 1885, p. 382.

¹² See Emerson's *Journals*, VI, p. 330, for another grouping of the world's geniuses including Goethe; also VI, p. 232; IX, 550.

¹³ Emerson placed Goethe above Dante sometimes. Cf. Emerson's *Journals*, IX, p. 328.

Emerson writes in *The Test*:

"In newer days of war and trade,
Romance forgot, and faith decayed,
When science armed and guided war,
And clerks the Janus gates unbar;
When France, where poet never grew,
Halved and dealt the world anew,
GOETHE, raised o'er joy and strife
Drew the firm lines of Fate and Life,
And brought Olympian wisdom down
To court and mart, to gown and town.
Stooping, his fingers wrote in clay
The open secret of today."¹⁴

But so far, Emerson, though paying the highest compliments to Goethe, seems only to have considered him objectively. There is little that is personal to this point between the author and his subject. It has thus often erroneously been thought that Emerson, like a good many of his countrymen who studied Goethe, never really felt the peculiar liberating influence of Goethe's writings; or his power to draw out and develop in his readers the virile qualities that help man to become superior to his environment and universal in spirit, and that have often given him a new aspect of life, its aims, and destinies.

That this conception regarding Emerson is a false one, but nevertheless a very natural one, is not so hard to understand, with the facts before us. The general criticisms of Goethe published until recently in Emerson's works—though very full—are at most only a partial record of Emerson's views, some of his later, shorter, criticisms of Goethe having been published in such works as the *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (Boston, 1853). This book, though containing one of the best character-sketches that Emerson ever wrote, had but a limited circulation and is at present almost unknown to many critics of Emerson. Emerson's contribution to this work was never republished in his collected works, because, according to T. W. Higginson, it was protected, where it is, by copyrights.¹⁵ Emerson's *Journals*, the most valuable record of his personal relations and feelings were, until recently published, almost a closed book, except to a very few.

¹⁴ Emerson's *Poems*, Boston, 1904, p. 223.

¹⁵ T. W. Higginson in *Our Boston Literary Letter* in the *Springfield Republican*, March 8, 1911.

Moreover, Emerson considered his feelings something private in his relation to outsiders, and expressed them, as a rule, only to the most immediate members of his family, in his poems, and scattered here and there throughout his prose. Because of this attitude on Emerson's part, he was thought to be very unemotional. Most of his biographers and even his fellow-members of the "Saturday Club," thought him and pictured him, therefore, as a man busied chiefly with abstract thinking, a philosopher safely and permanently encrusted behind certain views of life and the universe. A truly fitting record of his more human traits and an adequate history of the emotional nature of Emerson, the poet, unfortunately does not yet exist.

Emerson was, however, extremely reticent in his lectures and writings in speaking of himself, and he therefore failed to ascribe to other persons as much influence upon himself as might have appeared had he been less modest. The use of the pronoun of the third person for the first should, however, not mislead us. Emerson was not only susceptible to the influence of out-of-door nature, but also to persons. This is clear from what he has written in his *Journals* and other works of his friends, Alcott, Thoreau, Carlyle, and Margaret Fuller. How much he was influenced by the long continued study of some of his favorite authors is also shown from the number and the character of the numerous records left in his *Journals* and elsewhere of Goethe and Montaigne.¹⁶ It is fairly safe to conclude, with all the considerations mentioned in mind, that whenever Emerson spoke of Goethe as unreservedly and in as absolute terms as in the passages that shall follow, he did so because he had himself first profoundly felt what he said.

As early as 1839 Emerson writes of Goethe as follows: "Goethe unlocks the faculties of the artist more than any writer. He teaches us to treat all subjects with greater freedom, and to skip over all obstruction, time, place, name, usage, and come full and strong on the emphasis of the fact."¹⁷ Six years later (1845) Emerson writes again: "Goethe, hating varnish and falsehood, delighted in revealing the real at the base of the accidental; in

¹⁶ Emerson's relation to Montaigne is admirably treated in a paper read before the Modern Language Association by Professor Régis Michaud, December, 1913, and published in the July and August, 1914, numbers of the *Revue Germanique*.

¹⁷ Emerson's *Journals*, V, p. 222.

discovering connection, continuity, and representation everywhere; hating insulation; and appears like a god of wealth among a cabin of vagabonds, opening power and capability in everything he touches."¹⁸ Again the following year Emerson writes: "Anything that Goethe said, another might attain to say; but the profusion of sayings, every one of which is good and striking—no man."¹⁹ Goethe is to Emerson one of the "tonic books."²⁰

In judging Emerson's final view of Goethe, and the influence that Goethe must have had upon Emerson, the following passages are clear and to the points at issue: In his *Journals* of 1851 Emerson writes: "It will hereafter be noted that the events of culture in the nineteenth century were, the new importance of the genius of Dante, Michel Angelo, and Raffaele to Americans; the reading of Shakspeare; and, above all, the reading of Goethe. Goethe was the cow from which all their milk was drawn."²¹

In an entry made in the *Journals* a little later the same year we find: "Goethe is the pivotal man of the old and new times with us. He shuts up the old, he opens the new. No matter that you were born since Goethe died, if you have not read Goethe, or the Goethans, you are an old foggy, and belong with the antediluvians."²²

In transferring these thoughts from his *Journals* (Emerson often did this) into his contributions to the *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, he writes (1852), as if wishing to emphasize the debt that he believed all the world, that he himself, owed Goethe: "GOETHE—food or poison—the most powerful of all mental reagents—the pivotal mind in modern literature—for all before him are ancients, and all who have read him are moderns." "The religion, the science, the catholicism, the worship of art, the mysticism and daemonology, and withal the clear recognition of moral distinctions [are] final and eternal."²³

Lastly, in a passage from the essay, *Nominalist and Realist*, published 1855, Emerson completely exonerates Goethe's works

¹⁸ *Representative Men*, Boston, 1850, p. 87.

¹⁹ Emerson's *Journals*, VII, p. 176.

²⁰ Ibid. VII, 329.

²¹ Ibid. VIII, p. 214.

²² Emerson's *Journals*, VIII, p. 249.

²³ *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, I, p. 242 ff.

from the charge of being impure. He writes: "If you criticise a fine genius, the odds are that you are out of your reckoning, and, instead of the poet, are censuring your own caricature of him. . . . Whilst I fancied I was criticising him, I was censuring or rather terminating my own soul. After taxing Goethe as a courtier, artificial, unbelieving, worldly, I took up this book of *Helena*²⁴ (the second part of Goethe's *Faust*) and found him an Indian of the wilderness, a piece of pure nature like an apple or an oak, large as morning or night, and virtuous as a brier rose."²⁵

This was how Emerson viewed Goethe in the early fifties—and the verdict expressed here in these last passages, Emerson's latest and highest appreciation of Goethe, seems to have been his final one, for there is nothing in Emerson's *Journals* or other late works to assert the contrary, and there is much to verify the permanency of the high esteem in which Goethe was held here. In a letter to Hermann Grimm, January fifth, 1871, for example, Emerson writes: "For Goethe I think I have an always ascending regard."²⁶

These last passages shed a vast amount of light upon Emerson's final view of Goethe; for, when Emerson's judgment of Goethe has been referred to, the verdict has almost invariably been taken from *Representative Men*, or from a still earlier criticism of Goethe.

A large number of passages of the two poets in the expression of their most fundamental thoughts in a whole series of subjects, but especially regarding the working of the universe, are strikingly similar. When this fact is coupled with the growing admiration of Emerson for Goethe, it is at least very suggestive as to how much influence the German poet may have exerted upon the American. A large part of Emerson's poem, *Initial, Daemoniac and Celestial Love*,²⁷ as also the greater portion of his lecture on *Daemonology*²⁸ is based on Goethe's discussion of the same subject.

Emerson and Goethe held in common the doctrine of the world-soul, and to a certain degree that of *Gott-Natur* in character. Emer-

²⁴ For another high appreciation of the second part of *Faust* by Emerson, see *Journals*, VI, p. 466.

²⁵ Emerson's *Essay, Second Series*, Boston, 1885, p. 232 ff.

²⁶ *Correspondence between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Grimm*, Boston and New York, 1903.

²⁷ Emerson's *Poems*, p. 103 ff.

²⁸ Emerson's *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, Boston, 1884, p. 9 ff.

son is pleased with what he calls Goethe's, "our cheerful, Franklin-like philosopher's friendly view of the world," and quotes from Goethe the passage: "When the healthy nature of man works as a whole; when he feels himself in the world, as in a large, beautiful, worthy, and solid whole; when the harmonious well-being assures him a clear, free joy; then would the Universe, if it could be conscious, exult as arrived at its aim, and admire the summit of its own becoming and being."²⁹

Emerson refers again and again to the Goethean sequence "Truth, Goodness and Beauty." Emerson's ideal of man, one who, he says, stands "firm on legs of iron,"³⁰ with a clear vision, unhampered by prejudice or convention, master of himself and his environment, is exactly Goethe's ideal in *Wilhelm Meister*.

In his essay on *Immortality* Emerson states that "everything connected with our personality fails," and that "we have our indemnity only in the moral and intellectual reality to which we aspire,"³¹ in short in our ideals. This is Goethe's theme and conclusion in his poem *Dauer im Wechsel*, which Emerson has especially marked, along with the *Weltseele*, in his volume of Goethe's poems.³² In *Dauer im Wechsel* Goethe, too, sees and realizes the transitory character of everything, whether connected with our being or immaterial to us, and turns finally to the only permanent thing in life:

"Danke, dass die Gunst der Musen
Unvergängliches verheisst:
Den Gehalt in deinem Busen
Und die Form in deinem Geist."³³

But let us turn to Emerson's poems, always the most personal part of any poet's work, especially if he be a subjective poet, as both Emerson and Goethe were. Take for example these two expressions from Emerson's poem *Uriel*—almost a keynote to part of Goethe's works; but as unlike anything Emerson was brought up on as can be:

"Evil will bless. . . .
Out of the good of evil born."³⁴

²⁹ Emerson's *Journals*, VIII, p. 91 ff.

³⁰ *Uses of Great Men in Representative Men*, Boston, 1850, p. 28.

³¹ Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 291.

³² Notes by Professor Régis Michaud.

³³ Goethe's *Poems*, *Dauer im Wechsel*.

³⁴ Emerson's *Poems*, p. 14 ff. Emerson sometimes used this precept as a heading for a paragraph in his *Journals*. Cf. IX, pp. 304, 343, 540.

And what could be written more in the spirit of Faust as he is at the beginning of Goethe's drama, than this passage from Emerson's *Mithridates*:

"Too long shut in strait and few,
Thinly dieted on dew.
I will use the world, and sift it,
To a thousand humors shift it.
.....
Hither! take me, use me, fill me,
Vein and artery, though ye kill me!"³⁵

Or take this passage from Emerson's poem, *The World Soul*:

"When the old world is sterile
And the ages are effete,
He will from wrecks and sediment
The fairer world complete."³⁶

And some passages from *Woodnotes*:

"Harken once more?
I will tell thee the Mundane lore.
.....
Change I may but I pass not.
.....
Trenchant time behooves to hurry
All to yeon and all to bury;
All the forms are fugitive,
But the substances survive.
Ever fresh the broad creation.
.....
Onward and on, the eternal Pan,
Who layeth the world's incessant plan,
Halteth never in one shape,
But forever doth escape,
Like wave or flame, into new forms.
.....
From world to world the godhead changes;
.....
From form to form he maketh haste."³⁷

Compare the dominant idea in these passages, of the perpetual change and growth, of the incessant transition of forms of the world into new form, with some of Goethe's lines of the *Prolog im Himmel* of *Faust*. Here in Goethe, too, we find in the description of the

³⁵ Emerson's *Poems*, p. 28 ff.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 19.

³⁷ Emerson's *Poems*, p. 57 ff. The same idea occurs in Emerson's *Journals*, VI, p. 419 ff.; man as a re-creator, Ibid. V, p. 524.

continual rejuvenation of God's beautiful universe the "unbegreiflich hohen Werke . . . herrlich wie am ersten Tag" described as:

"Das Werdende, das ewig wirkt und lebt."³⁸

Again in Goethe's poem *Vermächtnis* occurs the same idea, only more personal:

"Kein Wesen kann zu nichts zerfallen!
Das Ewige regt sich fort in Allen,
Am Sein erhalte dich beglückt!
Das Sein ist ewig; denn Gesetze
Bewahren die lebendigen Schätze,
Aus welchen sich das All geschmückt."³⁹

But still fuller and clearer is this Goethean idea of the fundamental law of the universe set forth in the poem *Eins und Alles*:

"Und umzuschaffen das Geschaffne,
Damit sich's nicht zum Starren waffne,
Wirkt ewiges, lebendiges Thun.
Und was nicht war, nun will es werden,
Zu reinen Sonnen, farbigen Erden.
In keinem Falle darf es ruhn.
Es soll sich regen, schaffend handeln,
Erst sich gestalten, dann verwandeln;
Nur scheinbar steht's Momente still."⁴⁰

From the preceding pages it is evident how truly our foremost American thinker, and one of our most famous poets came to admire Goethe, and how many of the latter's most fundamental teachings entered into the fabric of Emerson's deepest thoughts.

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³⁸ Goethe's *Faust*, I, ll. 249-250, 346; cf. also 501 ff.

³⁹ Goethe's *Poems*, *Vermächtnis*, ll. 1-6. See also Emerson's *Method of Nature*, which Holmes has outlined, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 139, also *Ibid.* p. 100 ff.

⁴⁰ Goethe's *Poems*, *Eins und Alles*, ll. 13-21. See also Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe*, under date of Feb. 13, 1829.